DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 908 CS 508 390

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TITLE Teaching Speech Communication with a Foreign Accent: A Pilot Study.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (79th, Miami, FL, November 18-21, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; Communication Research; *Cultural Differences; *Foreign Nationals; Higher Education; Pilot Projects; Speech Communication; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Communication Behavior; Research Suggestions

ABSTRACT

A pilot study examined problems encountered by foreign instructors teaching in American colleges. Fourteen Chinese-born instructors teaching in Speech Communication answered a questionnaire containing 12 open-ended questions. Recurring themes were coded from the answers, and then organized into three categories: cultural differences; linguistic level of understanding; and relationship development. Results indicated that: (1) cultural differences was the major difficulty the subjects encountered; (2) deeper meanings of their students' language (including slang, idioms, and jokes) were the linguistic barriers the subjects were trying to overcome; (3) American students tended to use formal language to interact with foreign instructors, limiting establishment of personal relationships; and (4) subjects reported a high degree of satisfaction with teaching. Future studies should examine other ethnic groups besides the Chinese, other fields besides speech communication, and increase the number of participants for more reliable results. (A figure modeling the problems foreign instructors encountered in American colleges is included; 21 references and the questionnaire are attached.) (Author/RS)

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ED 363 908

Teaching Speech Communication with a Foreign Accent: A Pilot Study

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CS508390

Paper presented at the 1993 annual meeting of Speech Communication Association, November, Miami Beach, Florida.

Abstract

This study examines problems encountered by foreign instructors teaching in American colleges. Fourteen Chinese born instructors teaching in Speech Communication are asked to answer a questionnaire containing twelve open-ended questions. Recurring themes are coded form the answers, and then are organized into three categories, including cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding and relationship development, that can be used to explain problems experienced by foreign instructors.

Teaching Speech Communication with a Foreign Accent:

A Pilot Study

More than forty thousand international students enroll in American colleges every year, and the number is increasing (Dodge, 1991). Many of them return to their home countries after completing their degree. The rest of them join the various workforce in the United States. While as sojourners studying in American colleges, these international students have to cope with various problems caused by cultural differences, academically and socially. Thomas and Althen (1989) identify some of the major adjustment problems encountered by international students. For example, the initial adjustment to the new culture, academic difficulty due to the novelty of the academic system, cross-cultural gender relationships, social isolation, depression, and paranoia, and stressed relationships with host nationals. These problems often lead to the symptom of "culture shock" (Oberg, 1960) which may include "language shock" (Smalley, 1963), "role shock" (Byrnes, 1966; Higbee, 1969), "education shock" (Hoff, 1979), and "transition shock" (Bennett, 1977).

Abundant research have studied the cross-cultural adjustment experiences of international students. Among them, many deal with problems faced by international teaching assistants (ITA) (Baily, Pialorsi, & Zukowski/Faust, 1984; Franck & Desousa, 1982; Pica & Finger, 1990; Ross & Krider, 1992; Rubin & Smith, 1990). According to Shaw and Garate (1984), in addition to the common problems faced by international students in the adjustment process, those

additional problems encountered by ITA can be classified into three categories: language skills, communicative competence, and pedagogic skills.

Language skills refer to the ability to express meanings in the content area ITA has to deal with, including class management, students counselling, relationship development, and information sharing. Communicative competence refers to the ability to get along with host nationals in different social or special situations. Communicative competence is closely related to the concept of culture. Due to the cultural differences, the mismatch of expectations between ITA and American students often occurs. Pedagogic skills deal with teaching approaches ITA use in the classroom. The three elements are interweaved and can be used to assess the degree of success on ITA's performance.

Based on these categories of difficulties encountered by ITA, various programs are designed to help ITA overcome the problems (Chism, 1987; Civikly & Muchisky, 1991; Gaskill & Brinton, 1984; Stansfield & Ballard, 1984; Zukowski/Faust, 1984). These programs often take two forms: an intensive one- or two-week orientation program at the beginning of every semester, and an ongoing program offered through the academic year. Gaskill and Brinton (1984) indicate that the intensive one- or two-week program aims to detail aspects of the involved student population, the rationale for the syllabus, simulated testing situations, communication exercises of a role-playing and problem-solving nature, student evaluation, etc. Rice (1984) points out that the academic-year program is designed

to meet objectives such as: (1) to improve the language proficiency, including oral, aural, reading and writing skills, (2) to learn classroom teaching and interaction techniques, (3) to understand the educational and philosophical bases for curricula, and (4) to understand the respective roles of the faculty and ITA, and the university system that affects the ITA in dealing with university administrative procedures, matters of grading and testing, and general communications network in the university community.

While many studies focus on the issue of ITA, very few extend the research to examine full-time foreign instructors' experiences of teaching in American colleges. Because a portion of ITA are hired by different colleges as instructors after they complete the doctoral degree, would the problems experienced by ITA continue to affect them as a full-time instructor? It is the purpose of this study to investigate the teaching experience of full-time foreign instructors in American colleges.

Wang (1993) reports that those problems experienced by ITA in American colleges still exist even wen those ITA become full-time instructors. However, the degree and content of the problem may vary. For example, the requirement of the basic language proficiency on the aspects of fluency, grammar and expression basically is not the problem any more to foreign instructors. Instead, the instructors' native language accent may continue to bother American students.

Wang (1993) conducts an in-depth interview to examine problems

experienced by foreign instructors in American colleges by using three categories of questions: Using the American English, encountering the campus culture, and establishing rapport with students. Wang finds that the expectation of American students on the language proficiency remains a challenge to foreign instructors. However, the challenge is based on the ability to use English idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Moreover, the campus culture continues to be the most difficult part for foreign instructors to adjust to, especially, for example, to treat students on the basis of equal status and consider the occasional mistake made in the presentation of class materials as losing face. Finally, foreign instructors have difficulties in accepting the professional-client relationship in the academic life. They tend to feel that the relationship between American students and themselves is superficial and unsatisfactory.

To extend Wang's research this study further explores foreign instructors' teaching experience in American colleges by looking at the issue from three perspectives: Classroom encountering, cultural impact, and evaluation and interaction with colleagues. Classroom encountering deals with foreign instructors' feelings on handling teaching, expectation, and students' feedback in the classroom. Cultural impact deals with foreign instructors' perception on how they think cultural differences affect their performance in the classroom. Finally, evaluation and interaction with colleagues is in regard to teaching experiences.

Methods

Participants

Participants are drawn from members of the Association for Chinese Communication Studies (ACCS). All members of the ACCS are in Speech Communication discipline. Eighteen of them are Chinese born (from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) and full-time instructors teaching in American colleges. These instructors are target of the study. After the invitation, 15 of these 18 instructors agree to join the project. Among them, nine are male and six are female. Eleven are teaching in 4-year public college and four in 4-year private college. Teaching load is three courses per semester for ten participants and four courses for five of them. The three most common courses taught by them are intercultural communciation, interpersonal communication, and oral communication. The average age is 34.54. The average year teaching in the college is five. All participants are in the assistant professor level.

Procedure and Instrument

In order to obtain an in-depth information from participants, the researchers design a free-response questionnaire which includes twelve open-ended questions (see Appendix 1). The twelve questions cover three conceptual categories of foreign instructor's teaching experience, including classroom encountering (5 items), cultural impact (3 items), and evaluation and interaction with colleagues (4 items). Questions for demographic information and degree of satisfaction on teaching are also included.

The questionnaires are mailed to respondents who are asked to

return the questionnaire within four weeks. The survey takes about one hour and half to complete it. After a follow-up letter at the third week reminding them of answering the questions, all respondents return their questionnaire on time.

Data Analysis

The information from the twelve open-ended questions is coded and assorted into three categories: Classroom encountering, cultural impact, and evaluation and interaction with colleagues. Classroom encountering includes the hardest thing to adjust to, the most frustrated thing, the most satisfactory moment, the most embarrassing moment, and the effect of non-English accent in the classroom. Cultural impact includes the effect of different cultural background, the major cultural clash, and students' treatment of the cultural difference. The evaluation and interaction with colleagues include perception on teaching evaluation, sharing teaching experiences with colleagues, colleagues' understanding on teaching, and application of teaching experiences to colleagues (see Figure 1). The recurring themes from each question are organized and coded based on these categories. The final step is to analyze all recurring themes and draw a common model for explanation.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in three major categories consisting of twelve questions, following by recurring themes.

A. Classroom encountering:

Question 1: The hardest thing to adjust to.

Recurring themes:

1. The lack of motivation from students to seek excellence.
2. To deal with students' expectation on my teaching style and grade decision.
3. To pick up students' usage of slang and idioms.

Question 2: The most frustrated thing.

Recurring themes:

1. Students don't study hard enough.
2. The lack of respect form students to instructor.
3. Students attribute their classroom incompetence to instructor foreign background.
4. Students are arguing for their grades.

Question 3: The most satisfactory moment.

Recurring themes:

1. Students' positive feedback on instructor's teaching.
2. Students show appreciation and eager to learn.

Question 4: The most embarrassing moment.

Recurring themes:

1. Not able to understand or misunderstanding students' questions or language.
2. Unable to pronounce students' name correctly.
3. Students ridicule the instructor's accent or mispronunciation.

Question 5: The effect of non-English accent.

Recurring themes:

1. Have to use blackboard more often.
2. Students have problem understanding especially at the beginning of the class.
3. Some students think the instructor is less qualified as a speech teacher.

B. Cultural Impact:

Question 6: The effect of cultural background.

Recurring themes:

1. Mismatch of worldview and expectations between instructors and students.
2. Enrich teaching by providing students different perspectives.
3. Can be more neutral toward controversial issues.

Question 7: The major cultural clash.

Recurring themes:

1. The high expectation of learning from instructors.
2. The lack of respect to instructors.

Question 8: The effect of cultural differences.

Recurring themes:

1. Students are curious about me and the way of my teaching.
2. Foreign instructors have to try very hard to convert students' perception at the first several weeks of class regarding cultural differences.
3. Students tend to use more formal language to interact with foreign instructors.

C. Evaluation and interaction with colleagues

Question 9: Teaching evaluation from student.

Recurring themes:

1. Basically receive a fair evaluation from students.
2. Some students show biases in the evaluation.
3. Fair evaluation on categories of preparation and knowledge; Less fair on making the content interesting and giving difficult exams.

Question 10: Share teaching experience with American colleagues.

1. Pretty often.
2. Average 2-3 times every semester.

Question 11: Colleagues' understanding on my teaching.

1. They show respect and are nice to me, but they'll never truly understand my problems.

Question 12: The application of teaching experience to American colleagues:

1. Some teaching problems are commonly shared; some are difficult to apply to colleagues due to cultural difference.

Sex and the degree of satisfaction are also analyzed in the study. The average degree of satisfaction is 4.0 out of 5.0 scale. There is no significant difference between male and female on the degree of satisfaction.

Conclusion

Three concepts are originated from recurring themes of the twelve questions: Cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding, and relationship development (see Figure 1). Similar to research on ITA, cultural difference remains the major difficulty foreign instructors encounter in teaching Speech

Communication in the United States. Problems caused by cultural difference almost penetrate into each recurring theme. The results show that the major cultural problem between foreign instructors and American students is the perception on learning process. Foreign instructors tend to complain that American students do not work hard enough academically. Two potential problems from this perception discrepancy are (1) students often argue for the grade, and (2) in worse case, it enhances students' biases by attributing their incompetence to instructor's foreign background. Moreover, the cultural difference also leads foreign instructors to perceive that even their colleagues may not understand those problems they experience in the classroom, although their colleagues treat them nicely and politely. Nevertheless, foreign instructors acknowledge that a potentially positive influence of cultural difference may enrich the learning process and broaden students' perspectives.

Insert Figure 1 About here

Unlike ITA, the basic linguistic skills such as grammar and common expressions are not problems for foreign instructors. Instead, the deep meanings of students' language which are imbedded in cultural components are the barriers foreign instructors try to overcome. The results indicate that those culture bound language include slang, idioms, and jokes.

Due to physical and cultural differences a satisfactory relationship seems less likely to develop between foreign

instructors and American students. The results show that American students may be curious about the foreign instructors and the way they teach, but it seems built on a negative basis. Foreign instructors often have to take several weeks to conciliate students' curiosity, either successfully or unsuccessfully. Moreover, American students tend to use formal language to interact with foreign instructors. Formal interaction usually won't lead people to establish a personal relationship.

Finally, despite all the problems foreign instructors face in the classroom and some of them think that American students show personal biases in the evaluation process, most of them consider they are fairly evaluated by students. The high degree of satisfaction of teaching ($M = 4.0$) is consistent with the findings.

Discussion

The findings in this study provide a further step toward the understanding of existing problems non-native Speech Communication instructors encounter in American colleges. The three major patterns of problems are cultural difference, linguistic level of understanding, and relationship development.

Among the three patterns cultural difference is probably the major source hindering foreign instructors from understanding some of the special linguistic meanings and establishing a satisfactory relationship with students or colleagues. Different cultural perceptions always lead to distrust, misunderstanding or personal biases (Samover & Porter, 1991). According to Bresnahan (1989), due to the cultural difference, American students tend to distrust

those people who are unlike them, and want to avoid all contact with foreign instructors in terms of interpersonal relationships, job related encounters or classroom interaction.

The findings indicate that, like international teaching assistants, foreign instuctors as well need help from American academic institutions. In addition to provide training programs to assist foreign instructors to understand the campus culture, teaching American students to understand and appreciate people from different cultures is also a way to help foreign instructors adjust to the Amrican culture. This reinforces the need for inclusion of cultural diversity not only in the college level but throughout a person's education. Only through the education of cultural diversity, can the contradiction between American students and foreign instructors be solved. Future research should try to design a program that fits to this end.

Finally, there are several limitations of this study. First, all the participants are Chinese descendants. For future research it is necessary to examine whether or not the Chinese experience can be generalized to other ethnic groups. Second, the results of this are confined in Speech Communication discipline. Future research may compare the research findings from different disciplines. Lastly, increasing the number of participants may make the results more reliable.

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Appendix A

1. What is the hardest thing to adjust to?
2. What is the most frustrated thing?
3. What is the most satisfactory moment?
4. What is the most embarrassing moment?
5. Does your non-English accent affect your teaching? If yes, please explain.
6. Does your cultural background affect your teaching? If yes, please explain.
7. What is the major cultural clash between you and your American students?
8. Do you think American students treat you differently because of your cultural background? If yes, please explain.
9. Do you think you receive a fair evaluation from your American students?
10. Do you share your teaching experiences with your American colleagues? If yes, how often?
11. Do you think your American colleagues understand your problems in teaching? Why?
12. Do you think that your teaching experiences are applicable to your American colleagues and vice versa?

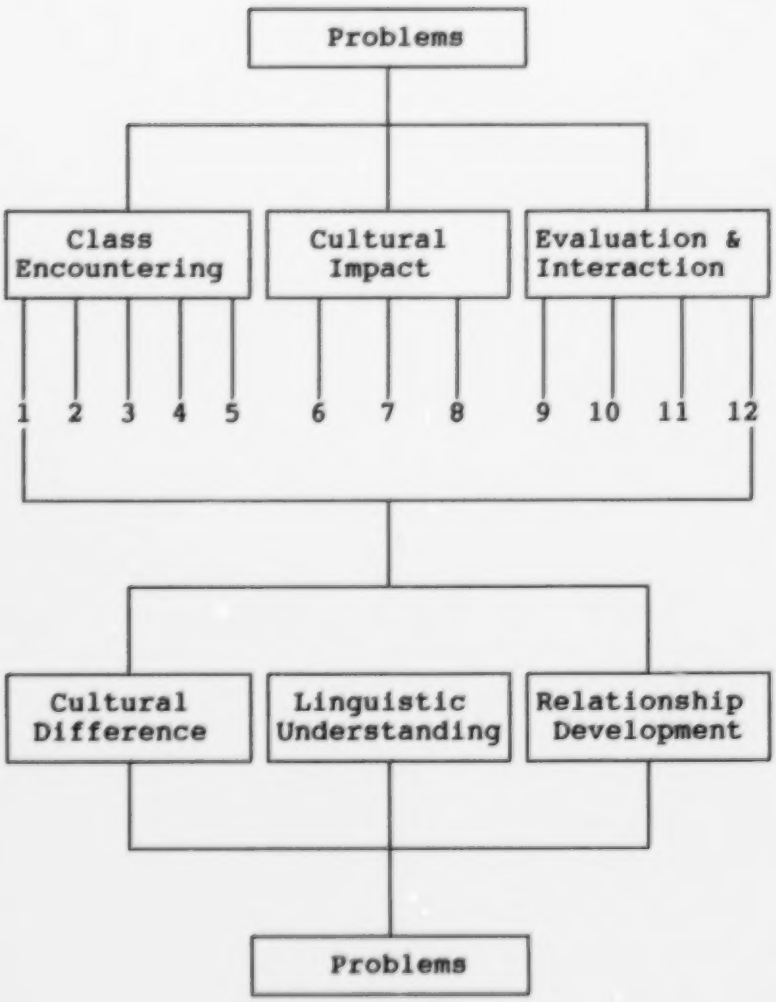

Figure 1. A Model of Problems Foreign Instructors Encountered in American Colleges.